

Picking up the slack

With the cancellation of the Great Wisconsin Film Festival, Madison loses the chance to see Robert Redford pick up the coveted Cheesehead Award. Instead, the city gains ambitious university programming.

story and graphic by
Jennifer Pfafflin

When the Wisconsin Film Office announced it was rolling up the red carpet and cancelling its plans for the much-touted Great Wisconsin Film Festival, it was a general disappointment to the festival's organizers, city officials and local film enthusiasts.

The original Great Wisconsin Film Festival, according to the Wisconsin Film Office, was supposed to be a glitzy affair, filled with Hollywood-sized screenings, complete with appearances by Sundance Film Festival fountainhead Robert Redford and the acclaimed director John Frankenheimer ("The Manchurian Candidate").

However, according to Wisconsin Department of Tourism spokesperson Krista Elias, when Hollywood announced it could not deliver on its promises of big-name stars or the big-budget films, Great Wisconsin Film Festival organizers decided not to produce the event and it fell into the hands of the UW-Madison Arts Institute.

Although the Wisconsin State Journal claims "all that remains are the Great Wisconsin Film Festival's name and a few low-budget screenings," the UW-Madison Art Institute's revised film festival will provide wide-breadth programming, featuring several national film festival entries and works from Madison locals.

In what it has taken a year for the Wisconsin Film Office not to do, the UW Arts Institute—fueled with the help of student and university groups such as various Wisconsin Union Directorate film committees, the Communication Arts

Department, the Independent Film and Video Collaborative, the Madison Film Forum, Cinematheque and communication arts professor Tino Balio—has, in only two months, put together an entire four-day program that will happily serve the Madison film community.

UW-Madison graduate student James Kreul, who is also an organizer of UW's Cinematheque film program and a member of the Madison Film Forum, is one of the university festival organizers.

"[The UW Arts Institute film festival] is an opportunity for students who love film to try to make something happen to improve downtown film exhibitions," Kreul said.

Besides screening local and national releases, the festival will be bringing in several of the filmmakers to speak to audiences about their works and filmmaking in general.

According to festival organizer Wendy Weger, who heads up the WUD film committee's Starlight Cinema series, Starlight has enormous success when it brings filmmakers to its program, and she expects the visiting filmmakers to draw the same attention at the festival.

Kreul said the number of independent filmmakers coming to the festival are an excellent opportunity for students.

"It is very important for students to talk to practicing filmmakers, especially those working on a smaller scale," Kreul said.

One of those filmmakers will be present at the grand opening of the Great Wisconsin Film Festival, a presentation of the 1999 Audience Prize Winner of the Slamdance Film Festival—the bratty little brother of Sundance that is gaining a credible reputation for its film entries—called "Man of the Century." The film, which is a black-and-white farce about a contemporary man who thinks he is living in the 1920s, will be presented by its filmmaker, Adam Abraham, in the Wisconsin Union Theater on Thursday, April 29.

Although Abraham may not have an extensive or well-known filmography, Weger said the film and Abraham still warrant the attention it is receiving from the festival organizers.

"Not only is [Abraham] someone with a Madison connection, he is someone who has proven himself in various film realms as successful," Weger said. "We're very excited to celebrate young talent."

There have been criticisms that the Arts Institute arm of the festival is too risky (dealing with unknown filmmakers) or one-sided (dealing with mostly independent, experimental or documentary films rather than the

major releases proposed by the Wisconsin Film Office); however, both Weger and Kreul agree the university-side of the festival should be about taking chances.

"I want people to take risks," Kreul said. "[I want them] to take a leap of faith and say, 'Let's explore for one weekend.'"

In the previous plans, the Great Wisconsin Film Festival did have more balanced programming. Weger described the original plans for the festival as consisting of two "arms." While the Wisconsin Film Office was going to bring larger, commercial releases to Madison, the university would present more independent and experimental films which, according to Weger, "experiment with the conventions of cinema."

"[The university's side] was to complement the commercial side of things going on in the Film Office," Weger said.

Both sides of the festival have similar goals in mind, as well. Wisconsin Film Office director Stan Solheim, who was unable to be reached for this article, said in previous interviews the Great Wisconsin Film Festival's goal is to raise awareness of Wisconsin as a viable place for filmmaking.

University festival organizers welcome the original plans for a co-sponsorship between the film office and UW-Madison for next year's festival.

"A balance is essential for the future success of the film festival because we're interested in all types of film," Kreul said.

"It is the assumption that it will go on next year with both participating."

The university's first attempt at the film festival will serve as the model to build on for future events.

"What this does is that it enables us to organize a prototype for a film festival to be held in Madison," said Tino Balio, a UW-Madison communication arts professor.

Organizers will be holding a roundtable discussion at the end of the festival to gain feedback from community members.

"[The discussion] will serve to correct some of the problems that have arisen with this year's film festival. No one asked, 'What do people want?' Kreul said. "It's an opportunity to hear what people thought, to see what they would like to see next year."

Balio said the roundtable discussion will allow organizers to talk about the programming and enlarge the scope of the festival for next year.

Although there will not be the gala premieres and celebrities as originally promised, the UW Arts Institute Great Wisconsin Film Festival is by no means watered-down. Instead, it provides a festival closely connected to the Madison community—something much closer to home than Hollywood.

Re-programming

Thursday, April 29

- UW-Madison alum Michael Forgorelski of the Motion Picture Academy Archive will speak on film preservation and will demonstrate film restoration techniques with the 1922 Frank Capra film "The Matinee Idol." A screening of the entire film will follow. 3:30 p.m., 4070 Vilas Communications Hall.

- "Man of the Century," the 1999 Slamdance Film Festival Audience Prize winner, will be presented by the filmmaker, Adam Abraham. 9 p.m., Wisconsin Union Theater, Memorial Union.

Friday, April 30

- Andy Warhol's favorite bombshell Edie Sedgwick appears in the double-screen projection of his 1965 film "Outer and Inner Space." 12:30 p.m., 4070 Vilas Communications Hall.

- Restored prints by the experimental filmmaker Warren Sonbert will be screened. 2:30 p.m., 4070 Vilas Communications Hall.

- The 20th anniversary presentation of the acclaimed Vietnam-era documentary "The War at Home," which uses Madison as its backdrop. 2:30 p.m., Fredric March Play Circle, Memorial Union.

- 1999 Sundance Film Festival entry "Brakkeage," a documentary about experimental filmmaker Stan Brakkeage will be presented, along with two of Brakkeage's shorts. 5 p.m., 4070 Vilas Communications Hall.

- UW-Madison graduate Carrie Ansell will present her debut film, "Flushed." 5 p.m., Fredric March Play Circle, Memorial Union.

- A restored "Crimson Kisses" is presented. 7:30 p.m., 4070 Vilas Communications Hall.
- A screening of "The Cruise," a documentary about Timothy "Speed" Levitch, a neurotic New York City tour guide. 7:30 p.m., Fredric March Play Circle, Memorial Union.

- See what other UW-Madison students are creating at Student Film and Video Screening. 9:30 p.m., 4070 Vilas Communications Hall.

- Presented a 1999 Sundance Film Festival Special Jury Prize for its stunning cinematography, "Treasure Island" will be presented, and will feature a question-and-answer session with actor Lance Baker, a Madison native. 9:30 p.m., Fredric March Play Circle, Memorial Union.

Saturday, May 1

- Madison-based filmmaker Janice Durand will present her documentary "The Gee Whiz Kid." 2 p.m., Fredric March Play Circle, Memorial Union.

- "Homestead Artifact," a film by UW-Madison alum Kent Hayward will be screened. 2:30 p.m., 4070 Vilas Communications Hall.

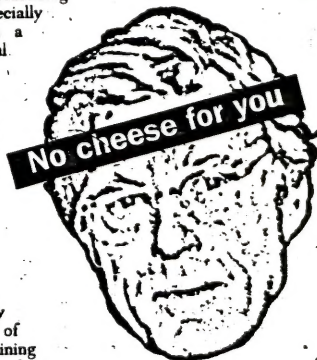
- Filmmaker Glenn Silber will be present at the encore screening of "The War at Home." 4 p.m., Fredric March Play Circle, Memorial Union.

- "Troika" is the latest film from Jennifer Montgomery, who will be present at the screening. 7:30 p.m., 4070 Vilas Communications Hall.

- "The Dancesmokers," nominated this year for a Best Documentary Academy Award, will be presented. 7:30 p.m., Fredric March Play Circle, Memorial Union.

- Filmmaker Bezi Speth will be on hand for the presentation of his 1999 Sundance film entry, "dread." 10 p.m., 4070 Vilas Communications Hall.

All events are free and open to the public.



Wisconsin film festival gets off to a roaring start

By Rob Thomas

The Capital Times

In the parlance of Johnny Twennies, the opening night of the Great Wisconsin Film Festival was the bee's knees, sister!

More than 500 people attended the premiere showing of Adam Abraham's "Man of the Century" at the Wisconsin Union Theater.

The black-and-white comedy met with wild enthusiasm, making the screening an upbeat christening for a festival whose very existence seemed in doubt two months ago.

"It hasn't been as stressful as we thought because the community has been so responsive," co-organizer Wendi Weger said.

Abraham's film chronicles the adventures of Johnny Twennies (Gibson Frazier), a newspaper columnist in modern-

day Manhattan who thinks he's living in the roaring '20s.

Shot on a low budget in just over three weeks, the film nevertheless has terrific locations, some name actors (Bobby Short, Frank "The Riddler" Gorshin) and a sunny disposition.

During a question-and-answer period, Abraham said he and Frazier (who co-wrote and co-produced the film) wanted to make a movie that went against the dark, violent grain of most modern movies.

"We thought 'Why can't movies be happy or fun?'" Abraham said.

Abraham said he currently is in negotiations to release the film domestically in most major U.S. markets, probably in the fall.

Curiously, Abraham related that Camel cigarettes wanted to sponsor a mini-tour

of the film, probably because Twennies lights up 18 cigarettes during the course of the film.

Ultimately, and probably fortuitously, plans for the lovable Johnny to become a shill for Big Tobacco fell through.

Abraham was invited to the festival through his sister Nina, a UW-Madison student. Many of the filmmakers who will be appearing with their work this weekend are former students, or have other Madison ties.

'Matinee' showing: Earlier on Thursday, film buffs were treated to a long-lost silent film, "The Matinee Idol," which was one of director Frank Capra's earliest works.

Michael Pogorzelski of the Motion Picture Academy Film Archive discussed the restoration of the film, which is the first



full-length feature to be restored entirely by digital means.

The film was thought to be gone forever, but archivists found a copy of it that had been owned by a cinema club in the south of France.

In addition to blemishes, scratch marks and other damage to the film, the original English title cards had been discarded and replaced with French cards.

Also, two scenes involving a couple em-

bracing had been excised, possibly because they were thought to be too racy.

Restoration experts transferred the entire film frame by frame to a high-definition video system, where the blemishes were digitally edited out. The picture was then transferred back onto film stock.

As for the title cards, one of the original cards (reading simply "A-HA!") remained, perhaps because it translated equally well in English and French.

Using that card, and a continuity script unearthed in an old storage box from Columbia Pictures, restorers were able to reproduce the entire set of English cards in their original font.

Pogorzelski, a UW-Madison graduate, will present restored works by Warren Sonbert at 2:30 p.m. today in 4070 Vilas Hall. He will also present a restored 35mm print of Samuel Fuller's crime classic "The Crimson Kimono" in the same theater at 7:30 p.m.

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